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SUBJECT: HIGHER EDUCATION IN TAJIKISTAN: HIGHER BRIBES, LESS
EDUCATION

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11. (SBU) Summary: Education is one of the most corrupt sectors of Tajikistan's society. Bribes, rather than aptitude, often govern which students succeed. Prospective students must pay as much as \$15,000 in bribes to enter the country's most prestigious universities, while even provincial colleges require several hundred dollars. Students often pay additional bribes to receive good grades on exams. Part of the problem is that professors' official salaries are as little as \$60 a month, forcing them to find other means of supporting themselves: either leaving the academic world or becoming involved in various sorts of corruption during admissions and exam periods. There is little will among politicians to change the system, either by increasing university wages, prosecuting egregious violators, or revamping university admissions. The result is an educational system that increasingly fails to educate. End summary.

Exam Period = "Harvest Season"

12. (SBU) Corruption exists throughout Tajikistan's economy, but the education system is reputed to be one of the most egregious. Depending on the location, status, and prestige of a particular faculty, Dushanbe's universities have unofficial admissions fees ranging from \$1,200 to \$15,000. Moreover, applicants who agree to pay bribes to be enrolled are also often willing to pay for grades throughout their years of education -- ensuring that students become cash cows for the duration of their studies. Tajikistan has a centralized system: admissions and admission-related testing take place in July and August, midterm exams are in December and January, and final exams are in May and June. These periods are known as "harvest season" because of the heavy demand for bribes.

Ministry Focuses on Beard Length and Footwear

13. (SBU) According to numerous observers, the quality of students is deteriorating as the system rewards wealth over achievement, leading to a burgeoning crisis in education. Few in the government appear overly concerned. The Minister of Education, Abdujabor Rahmonov, is himself notoriously corrupt. At times he almost appears to be gloating about his excesses: he boasts that he is a favorite of the President and is therefore untouchable. (Note: There have been increasing rumors that he will soon be removed from his post. Such rumors frequently do not pan out, however. End note.) Rahmonov has not endeared himself with civil rights and religious advocates either, being among the most eager to enforce the ban on hijabs and other religious displays. In what was billed as a major policy announcement, his ministry decreed that male professors over 50 years of age were allowed to have beards of no longer than 3 centimeters; those under 50 had to be clean-shaven. In the same diktat, the ministry declared that galoshes were

acceptable footwear for educational professionals.

¶4. (SBU) An analyst from a respected local political think tank believes the government's inattention to education is intentional. She likened the current policy to Turkmenistan under Niyazov: "It is easier to control uneducated people." She estimated that 19 percent of Tajikistan's population was illiterate -- adding that the Ministry of Education asked her not to make her estimates public.

Education to the Highest Bidder

¶5. (U) Students at the Tajik National University (TNU) reported to Embassy staff they were forced to pay administrators \$1,800 to enter less prestigious faculties, and up to \$5,000 to enter TNU's sought-after International Economic Relations Department in the Faculty of Finance and Economics. Prices have been rising fast; in 2006 one student said she had to pay only \$1,000 for admission. She believed there was no other way to enter TNU. High entrance exam scores did not help, since administrators could simply replace the name of the accomplished test-taker with that of someone who had paid for admission.

¶6. (U) A senior in TNU's Finance and Economics Faculty noted to us that a sharp price difference exists between admissions and exams. While she paid \$1,500 for admission, she said students paid as little as \$10 to receive the equivalent of a B on various mid-term exams. In general, admissions are far more expensive than good grades because the competition for admission is much more intense and the consequences of failure more extreme. Once admitted, students can make contact with middlemen who can easily arrange affordable grades. This same senior is one of the top students in her class, and because of her outstanding ability she was approached by a professor who asked her to take an admissions exam in place of an applicant who paid bribes to be accepted. She said she refused.

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¶7. (U) One TNU senior told us his neighbor, who was planning to enter the Tajik Medical University, was told by a middleman that the informal price tag was \$15,000, the highest figure we heard. In order to afford the bribe, instead of applying this year he joined hundreds of thousands of other Tajiks who left for Russia to work as labor migrants. The senior told us bribes to enter the prestigious Russian Tajik Slavonic University and Tajik National University's Law School went as high as \$10,000, depending on the faculty.

Education Cheaper in the Provinces

¶8. (U) In Khujand students usually pay less for their grades than in Dushanbe, according to a Khujand State University (KSU) student who transferred to the Tajik Russian Slavonic University in Dushanbe. The most expensive faculties at KSU are Law and International Relations. For admission, students pay an amount equal to their annual tuition fee, a bargain at \$800. And the top students do not actually bribe their professors. However, many students who cannot manage good exam scores still can buy their grades at prices comparable to those in Dushanbe. These low fees to upgrade one's grade can still make quite a difference to the teaching staff, whose salaries are a meager \$60 to \$70 a month.

Largely Ignored by Media

¶9. (U) There are few cases of corruption in the educational system reported in the media. Law enforcement agencies certainly catch teachers demanding bribes, but our contacts say most cases are resolved when the police get their cut of the payoff. A rare instance of media coverage occurred in August, when news agencies reported that a KSU teacher faced charges because she requested \$1,200 to help an applicant gain admission to the university. This is the only case post has come across in the media this year, but there are thousands of employees in the education sector whose livelihoods depend on bribery.

Alternative Models Thin on the Ground

¶10. (U) By all accounts the culture of corruption is pervasive throughout Tajikistan's state-run educational system and extends to the very highest levels. The one independent university, Dushanbe's Tajikistan Institute of Innovation Technology and Communication, has faced harassment and legal challenges from the government. Sources say that among other problems, the Institute has run afoul of the government for refusing to pay bribes to the Ministry of Education. In addition, it has employed some notable opposition figures as instructors, including the heads of two opposition parties. That it was founded by a United States citizen of Tajik origin may explain some of embassy's problems with the Minister. The Institute's previous rector, a new deputy minister of education, has sworn that he will force the university to close.

Comment: As Titanic Sinks, Government Looks for New Icebergs

¶11. (SBU) Comment: According to the State Statistical Committee, Tajikistan's teachers make on average \$53 a month. Living on \$1.75 a day is not a viable option in Tajikistan's cities, and the need to supplement income is obvious, either via outright extortion of students, by charging for extra lessons, or by engaging in outside business. The problem is hardly unique: throughout the Tajik government, salaries are too low to support a normal life. PolEcon Chief asked the President's senior economic advisers about their strategy for addressing the issue of starvation salaries in the education sector; they cheerfully missed the point, saying it wasn't really an issue since teachers could make money from their students in so many other ways. While instituting the fiscal management systems and economic growth needed to cure the salary problem will take many years, providing more educational exchange opportunities and bringing the Peace Corps to Tajikistan would help change practices in the near term by changing the expectations of students and their parents. End comment.
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